

## Review of the Book:

**Ross, E. Wayne (Ed.): The Social Studies Curriculum. Purposes, Problems, and Possibilities. Fourth Edition. Albany: State University of New York Press (SUNY) 2014, 419 pp., US \$ 31.95.**

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This is the fourth volume of this edition since it first appeared in 1992. Twelve of the eighteen chapters are completely new, e.g. a chapter on islamophobia (*Beyond Fearing the Savage: Responding to Islamophobia in the Classroom*) by Özlem Sensoy (289-312). All other chapters have been revised and updated.

“Teaching by its very nature is a political act”. This programmatic confession from Michael Apple’s *Ideology and Curriculum* (1990) which introduces Paul Orlowski’s chapter about *Critical Media Literacy and Social Studies* expresses best the intention of most of the 18 chapters in this volume: a critical social studies curriculum that focuses on deconstructing hegemonic discourses that impede the task of *Teaching Democracy* (Joseph Kahne/Joel Westheimer). While sensitive towards continuing “alarmist” (p. 72) educational discourse, many of the contributors heavily criticize current neoliberal education reform in the United States and Canada, in the context of educational policies like *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) or *Race To The Top* and an ongoing conservative rewriting of history as for example in common core State Standards in Texas. Authors repeatedly argue against rote learning and the “banking concept of teaching” (p. 328), an approach reduced to ensuring “...students knew several pages’ worth of disconnected social studies terms, dates, wars, presidents, kings, pacts, and treaties” (p. 286). Paolo Freire is one of the most cited informants. Authors both criticise non-reflective standards-based education and the pressures and non-intended outcomes of high-stakes testing as well as attempting to identify alternative forms of assessment conducive to learning (Sandra Mathison: *Making Assessment Work for Teaching and Learning*).

Many of the contributors of this volume introduce themselves to the reader as former and experienced teachers, who have taught in various school settings, grade levels and states. In his chapter *Why Inquiry?*, Doug Selwyn, relates the date of receiving his teaching certificate in 1981 to the beginning of Ronald Reagan’s presidency, giving an outline of the political culture of the 1980es and contrasting it with societal changes which have taken place up to the present day: “How could we have imagined the collapse of the Soviet Union, the tearing down of the Berlin Wall, Enron and the financial bubbles, two wars in Iraq, the war in Afghanistan ... genetically modified foods, the WTO (and the battle of Seattle), melting polar ice caps and climate change, Occupy Wall Street, and the Red Sox

winning the World Series, not once, but three times ... we are no more able to predict what our current students will be dealing with in 2045, thirty-three years from now, than I could have in 1981” (p. 286). Thus, an unpredictable and „open“ future answers the author’s question of “*Why inquiry?*”.

Some rather binary chapters challenge what is discussed as “controversy in the classroom” (Diane E. Hess, see review [www.jsse.org/index.php/jsse/article/view/1136](http://www.jsse.org/index.php/jsse/article/view/1136)) in the US-context and, what is known in Germany as ‘Beutelsbach Consensus’ - political education which respects the prohibition of overwhelming the pupil and the need to treat controversial subjects as controversial. Gregory Queen examines the risks of “being political” in the classroom in his chapter *Class Struggle in the Classroom*.<sup>1</sup> He argues that, interestingly, parents do not complain about other teachers who teach only the textbook point of view. However, the same parents are quick to fear that their children are being indoctrinated when their children are taught a one-sided Marxist curriculum of American contemporary and global history. (p. 328). The role of educators should be defined as „in a partisan manner“ and educators should “acknowledge their working-class status within this struggle between capitalists and workers” (p. 319). Among others, this chapter is excellent material for controversial discussion in an academic social studies teacher training course!

A useful name index (p. 397-409) indicates additional classical reference authors. As well as Paolo Freire, referred to above (*Education for Critical Consciousness* and *Pedagogy of the oppressed*), these include John Dewey, Michel Foucault and Georg Lukacs (*History and Class Consciousness*). The detailed subject index (p. 411-419) includes rare keywords like “anarchism” or “memorization”.

“The curriculum is what students experience.” (Preface) Most convincing chapters describe alternative social studies curricula, many of which seem to have been evaluated during teaching practice. It is a pity that while clearly a lot of didactical experience underlying the description of intended curriculum, there is almost no space given to reports of the acted and staged curriculum. Thus, the creation of authentic spaces for democratic social studies education remains programmatic and “abstract”. Voices of the students, classroom discourse, learning problems or even crises and their unintended outcomes, are rarely nowhere documented, if at all, and could be a challenge for the fifth edition, integrating qualitative



social studies classroom research into critical teaching into the programmatic profile of critical teaching.

Social studies is an “umbrella design” (p. 3) and the first two chapters, in particular, deal with history and concepts. Many of the chapters can be used in academic teacher training as basic discussion input. Joel Westheimer *Teaching Students to Think about Patriotism* has already become a classic (p. 127-138). The collection can be highly recommended to all European/foreign readers who want to gain non-mainstream access to social studies.

(See review in JSSE 2011-1 on Current Trends and Topics in U.S Citizenship, Law-Related and Economic Education: [www.jsse.org/index.php/jsse/article/view/1156](http://www.jsse.org/index.php/jsse/article/view/1156)).

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<sup>i</sup> From 2004 to 2012, Gregory Queen had been chair of a high school social studies department and used his position to resist the imposition of common curricula and assessments. As a direct result of his resistance, he was forced to resign as department chair and experienced restrictions to his academic freedom. As the editor, Wayne Ross, he joined the Rouge Forum ([www.rougeforum.org](http://www.rougeforum.org)), a civil organisation concerned with questions such as „How can we teach against racism, national chauvinism and sexism in an increasingly authoritarian and undemocratic society?“

